

RETHINKING HIGHER ADMISSIONS STANDARDS FOR PRINCIPAL PREPARATION PROGRAMS

The old computer adage, "Garbage in, garbage out" seems to underlie much of the concern directed at admission and selection standards for applicants to administrator training programs. According to these criticisms, low admissions standards result in unqualified students, less-rigorous curricula, and graduates unprepared for administrative positions. More selective admissions criteria, it is argued, would eliminate marginal students, allow more rigor in the curriculum, and result in better candidates to fill principalships. Thus, a steady drumbeat of criticism of current admission procedures has rolled on for more than forty years, accompanied by calls for higher standards and better recruitment strategies to increase both the quality and quantity of applicants.

The criticisms are not recent. As early as 1960, the American Association of School Administrators criticized the admission of students into principal preparation programs: "It seems completely fair to say that the procedures generally employed by colleges and universities are admission rather than selection procedures. They are ways of getting students into preparation programs, but not on any discernible selective basis" (American Association of School Administrators, 1960, p. 83). These concerns were echoing decades later in reports issued by the two national organizations concerned with improving the quality of training for school administrators (National Commission on Excellence in Educational Administration, 1987; National Policy Board for Educational Administration [NPBEA], 1989). Murphy (1999) found that department chairs perceived improvement in their recruitment and selection of students for preparation programs between 1989 and 1996, reporting "evidence of strengthened standards and greater selectivity" (p. 177). The department chairs described increased standards on traditional measures and the use of more criteria, including personal interviews, samples of written work, and documentation of leadership experiences. Despite Murphy's somewhat optimistic report, two recent reviews (Browne-Ferrigno & Shoho, 2002; Creighton & Jones, 2001) continued the criticism of selection standards, calling for higher standards on the existing criteria and increasing the evidence base from which to draw judgments about candidates.

Looking more broadly at systems of leadership preparation and schooling suggests that changing admissions procedures is unlikely to be a viable strategy, given the organizational realities of higher education systems, the inter-organizational relationships with K-12 schools, and the consumer-choice behaviors of aspirants. Moreover, the call for higher admissions standards may not be aligned with the values and beliefs we espouse in current thinking

about the nature of effective school leadership. This suggests that pursuing other strategies for program improvement might produce better results.

Recommendations for Raising Standards

The calls for raising standards generally advocate using higher standards to evaluate traditional criteria (e.g., raise the required minimum grade point average, require more years of teaching experiences) or devising assessments that better measure the potential of candidates for success in graduate school and beyond such as interviews or evidence of past leadership. The NPBEA (1989) recommended a series of measures including the development and administration of a standardized national test for admissions and limiting admission to individuals scoring in the top quartile of the test. In addition, NPBEA recommended “state licensure, a master’s degree in teaching, and evidence of successful teaching in a classroom setting” (p. 14). In an important caveat, the NPBEA stated that its recommendations were not intended to be implemented piecemeal, but as a body of inter-related policies that require support from universities, local districts, state legislatures, and state agencies. Others who have addressed the implementation of standards have not recognized these inter-relationships. The NPBEA recommendations are the most far-reaching, but they are by no means alone. Others have concurred and some institutions have instituted policies that require a higher standard on existing measures or new measures of applicant suitability (e.g., Milstein, 1993). However, in the main, there is a tacit acknowledgement that admission is denied to very few applicants.

Organizational and Environmental Factors

Katz and Kahn (1966) pointed out that the primary goal of an organization is to interact with its environment to maintain homeostasis. Applying this insight to preparation programs indicates that the inputs necessary for the continued existence of such programs include the financial resources that may be distributed based on student enrollments. Given that these resources often fund faculty positions, it is highly unlikely that programs will condone higher admission policies that result in substantially reduced numbers of students, especially when the very faculty members who make decisions about admissions may find their own positions in jeopardy due to declining enrollments. Shakeshaft (1999) addresses this issue candidly, revealing how Hofstra’s program faculty raised standards to improve the program and subsequently lost a tenure line due to drops in enrollment. Given that most departments offering degrees in educational administration have fewer than six members,

and 40% have fewer than five full-time members (McCarthy, 1999), the potential loss of a tenure line may pose a significant deterrent to raising admission standards. In addition, wherever there are multiple training programs (including online programs), applicants rejected by a high-standards institution are likely to be accepted elsewhere (Bredeson, 1996). This brings tuition dollars to the competitors of the institutions that rejected the applicants without it substantially impacting the pool of well-prepared candidates for principalships.

Changes in the economy that affect the supply and demand of both administrators and potential administrators, changes in state and federal policy, and changes in local demographics may all affect the pool of applicants for administrative preparation programs far more than do the admission requirements of a particular program. The impact of the labor market on teacher shortages is instructive. In writing about raising admission standards for teacher education programs, Haney (1990) said: "History clearly shows that market and social forces severely condition the impact that any formal mechanisms of teacher selection and evaluation have on the recruitment and retention of teachers" (p. 47). In the last several years, alternative certification programs for teachers, such as Teach for America, have increased the pool of teacher applicants by reducing the time in formal study. Similarly, forces outside the control of administrator preparation programs, such as changes in state certification requirements and alternative certification programs, are likely to affect the applicant pool more than changes in admission requirements do. This is not to suggest that we abandon efforts to admit high quality applicants, but only that we recognize external factors that impact the number of applicants to programs.

Several authorities have recommended working more closely with school district partners to identify qualified candidates and recruit them into administrative programs. This is undoubtedly important in the recruitment of some students, particularly women and minorities (Murphy, 1999). However, it is probable that few districts are of a size to recruit enough students annually to sustain such an ongoing partnership, particularly if students matriculate in a cohort group. Also, this recruitment assumes that principals can identify incipient leaders (and persuade them to enter preparation programs), but there is no evidence to support this proposition. Shakeshaft (1999) reported that asking administrators for teachers interested in becoming administrators yielded a completely different list of prospective students than did asking the administrators for names of the most creative and best teachers. In fact, might it not be possible that school district administrators would recruit students that the university program would prefer to reject? Yet deciding to refuse admission to candidates who have earned the stamp of approval from their local school

districts may be problematic. Thus, while important for identifying potential leaders who may not self-identify as prospective administrators, these strategies are not without problems.

Applicants' Choices

In addition to institutional factors such as those described above, enrollments are impacted by the individual incentives and disincentives that each applicant perceives pertinent to his or her situation—that is, to the applicant's behavior as a consumer of educational products. Many of these incentives are not under the control of preparation programs. For example, Creighton and Jones (2001) found it "alarming" that 60% of the educational administration programs they studied allowed students to complete a graduate degree in administration without having teaching experience that would be required for state certification as an administrator (p. 24). Assuming prospective students understand that teaching experience would help them to benefit from their graduate studies in administration, why do they apply to master's degree programs immediately upon obtaining their bachelor's degrees? One explanation is that most school district teacher salary schedules are structured to reward teachers who earn master's degrees quickly, thus it is to the prospective student's financial advantage to enter administrative studies immediately. Moreover, students who received financial aid during their undergraduate programs may postpone loan repayments if they are enrolled for a minimum number of graduate credit hours.

Taken together, these financial factors may be more salient to prospective students than is the educational desirability of building a base of teaching experience before seeking a graduate degree. If schools restructured salary schedules so that teachers could not earn salary increases for graduate study until after their fifth year of teaching, delaying entry into graduate school would make more sense to beginning teachers. This policy could serve both school districts, whose novice teachers could center their attention on their classrooms rather than graduate studies, as well as graduate programs whose students would enter with a basis of classroom experience. Similarly, if loan programs delayed repayment for those who teach immediately after graduation, teachers might be more willing to delay graduate study.

Glasman, Cibulka, and Ashby (2002) noted that "demand for high-quality programs from potential entrants has been relatively weak" (p. 8). Evidently, the value of programs as perceived by academics differs from that perceived by students who likely plan to stay in K-12 employment. There may be several reasons for this. Anticipated pay increases in K-12 schools accruing as a result of graduate study are insufficient to compensate time away

from their employment for full-time study or relocation to another area to enroll in nationally recognized graduate programs. Those who found their undergraduate experience of limited value may generalize this observation to graduate programs as well, leading them to conclude that one program is as good as another.

Prospective students' beliefs about their future employment prospects may be relevant to their choices as well. For example, students' confidence in the ability of professors to influence their future placement in administrative positions may be more salient than a program's standards or the professors' research credentials. Thus the opportunity to take a class from (and begin networking with) a local superintendent teaching as an adjunct professor may be valued more than the opportunity to study with a full-time professor whose primary connections are to the academic discipline. Similarly, factors such as recommendations of colleagues who have taken administrative courses, personal relationships with faculty or adjunct faculty members, or socially constructed knowledge about the demands, reading assignments, difficulty of projects, time commitments, or other convenience factors may loom large. One graduate reported that a friend had transferred from one preparation program to another because he could finish in one year. The friend said: "They realize we're busy people and don't ask that much of us." In contrast, in academic fields where there are standard benchmarks for educational training programs (e.g., passing the bar exam or medical boards), or clear disincentives to begin one's professional practice with an inadequate educational foundation (e.g., medical malpractice lawsuits), students may select their institutions on the basis of the institution's ability to impart the knowledge necessary for licensure and successful practice. Until they perceive educational licensure, job placement, and job success to be more closely connected to the educational quality of a program, applicants in educational administration may rely on other factors when selecting their programs. Changing admission standards is unlikely to be relevant to their perceptions of the desirability of a high-quality program.

Alignment of Outcomes and Admission Criteria

All of the factors discussed to this point relate to environmental constraints that mitigate against efforts to raise admissions standards, regardless of the merits of the proposed changes in terms of training more effective K-12 school principals. However, there are educational reasons for thinking more deeply about these proposals as well. The assumed purpose of admission standards is to insure that candidates admitted to a program will be reasonably successful in meeting established program outcomes and become successful

school administrators; therefore, it is important that admission standards be linked to the outcomes. This is difficult to do in educational administration. Despite attempts to describe the knowledge base, there is no clear consensus about the desired outcomes of educational administration programs (Murphy, 1999). Even when leaders serving on national panels (such as the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Commission [ISLLC]) forge agreements on expected outcomes, there is little reason to believe that practice outside the academy will soon conform. Glass (2003) found that superintendents who are hiring new administrators do not attend to the outcomes specified by the ISLCC standards. Thus, it is unclear that there is a set of agreed-upon outcomes in the field, making it problematic whether selection processes can discriminate the characteristics and outcomes desired by those who will hire future educational leaders. Where program reformers have been successful in crafting sets of guiding principles and expected outcomes for particular university programs (e.g., Bridges, 1992; Sirotnik & Mueller, 1993), the development of admission standards aligned with outcomes seems more straightforward, but problems of alignment with the field may remain.

Some proposed changes seem to link to desired outcomes. Proposals to require teaching experience or certification attempt to insure that candidates possess some basic knowledge of curriculum and instruction and social knowledge about the way schools work. On the other hand, the knowledge that students gain from their K-12 teaching experience may lead as easily to misconceptions about efficacious leadership or teaching that are difficult to uncover and change, including socialization to the way schools are rather than the way that schools might be to meet the demands of the future. Requiring that applicants have previous experience in teaching may exclude those who have entered teaching as a mid-life career change and have demonstrated leadership in non-teaching fields such as the military, social work, health care, or even those who have led private or charter schools successfully. Similarly, requiring state licensure eliminates those who may be teaching in private or charter schools where certification has not been required. It is noteworthy that some major school systems have hired high-profile leaders who do not have backgrounds in education.

Some have suggested that faculty members interview applicants. If we look to the interviewing of teachers for guidance, we may discover this practice is less discriminating than we might hope. Scriven (1990) wrote about the interview as a means of selecting teachers for employment, calling it "more of a problem than a solution" (p. 29). He finds interview teams susceptible to the "con artist," difficult to control with respect to giving each candidate a uniform set of prompts, and likely to focus too much on the sociability of a candidate rather than their work productivity. Given these problems with

interviewing as a selection mechanism for teaching positions (where there is arguably more agreement and specificity about the desired knowledge and skills), it is reasonable to question whether it can make a contribution to selection of graduate students in educational administration. It is problematic whether faculty interviewers could avoid selecting students who showed a preferred mixture of amiability, self-confidence, deference, and curiosity. Beyond the problems with the reliability and validity of the interview, it is unclear that faculty members would agree to spend the time required and whether the investment of faculty time would change the results of the selection process to a degree that made this investment worthwhile. In other words, as a result of adding interviews, how many applicants would be denied admission (who otherwise would have been admitted), or admitted (when they would have been denied based on traditional measures)?

Cambron-McNabe (1999) urges us to clarify our ideas about the purposes of schooling before embarking on program reform, paraphrasing John Goodlad's remarks that "change will not occur if we continue to prepare for the prevailing school circumstances" (p. 219). While bureaucratic leadership once prevailed, the last twenty years have seen substantial changes in the conceptions of leadership needed for K-12 schools (Grogan & Andrews, 2002). These newer conceptions focus on different knowledge (e.g., curriculum and instruction) and leadership processes that are collaborative or distributed (Elmore, 2000; Morrissey, 2000; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001). Similarly, Fullan's (1991) work has described how all teachers must become change agents and that this includes developing moral purpose, habits of inquiry, collaboration, initiative, and shared decision-making.

Distributed perspectives on leadership remove the sole focus from the individual and posit that leadership is a shared endeavor. "Rather than seeing leadership practice as solely a function of an individual's ability, skill, charisma, and cognition, we argue that it is best understood as practice distributed over leaders, followers, and their situation (Spillane et al., 2001, p. 13). Similarly, Lambert discusses the need for building leadership capacity in the school as a whole so that administrative turnover does not disrupt reform efforts (Lambert, 1998). These perspectives make clear that school principals work with and through other people.

If we accept that the definition of successful leadership has changed from hierarchical to distributed or shared leadership, then the program purposes, outcomes, and admission and selection criteria should change as well. If the principalship is too big a job for one person, there is a need for others in the school to assume some of the leadership. If leadership is a shared undertaking, should we exclude from preparation programs those teachers who do not score in the top quartile of our measures for admission, and then teach the

accepted top quartile that they must develop the leadership capacity of those teachers in the field without our help? Are we not challenged to accept that distributed leadership means that leadership will be distributed among all quartiles of teachers and that those who teach in leadership preparation programs ought to practice what we preach—that leadership involves more than the elite? If we focused graduate work on K-12 student learning, we might entice leadership teams from schools to enter our programs and develop the capacities in schools to really make a difference for student achievement. Without these teams of people in preparation programs, we may simply be reinforcing the notion of the hero leader—and perhaps discouraging our students with the implied expectation that they must be the experts on every aspect of leadership from curriculum and instruction to law and business management.

In contrast to the collaborative nature of leadership work, academic requirements are almost entirely focused on individual achievements. Leadership cannot take place within an individual; by definition it involves relationships. Yet our admissions processes focus on individual accomplishments (e.g., completed undergraduate degrees, passed admissions tests). Perhaps this is a result of the long struggle to establish educational administration as a field of graduate study. Murphy (2001) writes: “The central problem is that our fascination with building the academic infrastructure of school administration has produced some serious distortions in what is primarily an applied field” (p. 4). If this is true, we can no longer continue to advocate for admissions standards that favor individual students who succeed at academic tests. Instead we must look for those who may do well in the practice of school leadership but be less able to articulate what they know and do in ways that satisfy academic admissions standards.

Conclusion

Some academic standards are necessary to assure that students admitted to graduate programs are likely to be successful, and most colleges and universities have general standards for admission to graduate school including minimal grade point averages. Certainly, intelligence and academic achievement are desirable characteristics in school leaders, especially since there is evidence that transformational leaders provide intellectual stimulation to their followers (Leithwood, Tomlinson, & Genge, 1996). The question is whether raising standards such as requiring higher grade point averages or more experience in teaching is a sensible method of reaching the goal of preparing more effective school leaders.

Before instituting any new selection criteria for admission to principal preparation programs, faculty should consider the factors discussed above

that are likely to interact with admission criteria, including the impact on program enrollment, effects on applicants' choices in the marketplace, benefits likely to accrue from any new measures vis a vis faculty effort, and the alignment of proposed criteria with the program's purposes and desired outcomes. Where market forces and organizational incentives dictate the interplay between the size of the applicant pool and the need to generate program revenues, faculty should consider how effective the increased processes or higher standards are likely to be. As some have pointed out, increasing the size of the applicant pool is likely to have more beneficial effects on capturing successful students than is a change in entrance requirements.

Faculty should examine the assumptions and likely effects of proposals to narrow the pool of candidates to those with prior teaching experience, licensure, or other requirements. Such assumptions include the idea that a school leader must be the repository of expertise in teaching and learning and that non-teaching routes to educational leadership are unacceptable. However, if we value intellectual inquisitiveness, content knowledge, and the ability to forge good working relationships, we might acknowledge that these qualities do not exist solely among teachers.

It may help to place admission to preparation programs in some context. Admission is not the only hurdle to administration that future principals must surmount. The aspirants must also pass graduate classes, meet state licensure requirements (including tests of administrative knowledge in some states), and be hired by a school district. School districts looking for good principals have concerns that are parallel to programs looking for good graduate students: they need to increase the pool of applicants in order to insure they have more qualified applicants. If faculty members restrict the pool of applicants by denying admission to some candidates (and those candidates do not matriculate elsewhere), the ultimate result is to restrict the pool available to school districts. If we knew with certainty what each school needed, this might be more defensible. However, the schools that need principals are a diverse lot: rural and metropolitan, large and small, diverse and variously challenged. These contexts require different types of leaders.

A large pool of students admitted to a program does not mean that students necessarily will continue. A rigorous program of study and frequent feedback to students on their performance can help students to recognize when they are ill-suited for the field. Classes that promote student interaction, are closely tied to school-based experiences, and provide for peer feedback help to inform students where they stand relative to others in their beliefs and capabilities. Professors who are conscientious about providing significant feedback on written work and confronting those who need to improve their skills can also, when warranted, counsel students out of the profession or help

them to perceive their leadership potential more accurately. They can employ defensible grading practices that allow them to give non-passing grades to students who fail to meet specific standards. Improving preparation programs requires that we attend to the core tasks of creating learning environments and aligning our curriculum, assessment, and instruction (Glasman et al., 2002).

These recommendations to focus on course rigor do not involve sweeping systemic changes, nor do they have the siren call of new policies that will produce reform. Instead they are more on the order of “small wins” as described by Weick:

A small win is a concrete, complete, implemented outcome of moderate importance. By itself, one small win may seem unimportant. A series of wins at small but significant tasks, however, reveals a pattern that may attract allies, deter opponents, and lower resistance to subsequent proposals. Small wins are controllable opportunities that produce visible results. (Weick, 1984, p. 43)

Turning our attention from obtaining better inputs through toughened admission standards to improving our instruction and assessment of students’ work is not to suggest that we can make the proverbial silk purse from a sow’s ear, but rather to recognize that the better points of leverage for change might well be the individual classrooms where professors can have significant impact. Accomplishing change in the classroom is the type of small win that can have lasting effects.

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